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Ancestors of the Race: The Antimodern Ethnography of Henry Steel Olcott's *People from the Other World*

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Ancestors of the Race: The Antimodern Ethnography of Henry Steel Olcott's *People from the Other World*

by

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Abstract

Ancestors of the Race: The Antimodern Ethnography of Henry Steel Olcott's *People from the Other World*

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In this report, I will examine *People from the Other World* (1875), a text which documents the transition from American Spiritualism to international Theosophy. The narrative is based off of reports which lawyer-turned-mystic Henry Steel Olcott wrote concerning the validity of séances that were held by the famous mediums, the Eddy brothers, at their rural homestead in Chittenden, Vermont. These gatherings were unique because unlike early Spiritualist séances, which featured the ghosts of departed family members, the Eddy brothers most often contacted a more diverse group including Native American spirits, the ghost of a Khourdish warrior, and the ghost of an Egyptian juggler, among others. I attribute the variety of spirits at these séances to three intersecting tides of cultural influence: The first is the rise of ethnographic studies and the subsequent vogue of ethnographic subjects. Secondly, the Eddy group exhibited signs of antimodern ambivalence towards an age rich with new inventions which may have seemed, to the lay person, to be the work of magic. Finally, at the Eddy séances costumed play is used as a

form of therapeutically reassuring ritual during this time of rapid change. While some critics in recent years have posited that such Theosophic meetings may have served as a sign of cross-cultural civic engagement, I will argue that it is far more likely that for the Eddy group, becoming possessed by foreign spirits served as a tool for self understanding which helped them to adapt to the encroachment of a seemingly haunted age.

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Introduction

Lawyer, agriculturalist and spiritual seeker, Henry Steel Olcott, visited the home of the Eddy family in Chittenden, Vermont in 1874 to report on ruptures in space and time through which a variety of ghosts were allegedly communicating to and through "spiritual mediums."[i] The famous mediums, the Eddy brothers, were a part of the thriving Spiritualist movement, begun by the teenage Fox sisters over two decades earlier in their rural Rochester, New York home where they claimed to have heard "rappings" from the ghost of a wrongfully murdered peddler.[ii] The movement, which sought to prove that the Spirits of the departed lived on in death exactly as they had in life right down to their very clothes, was comforting to family members who had lost loved ones in the bloody conflict of the Civil War.[iii] The fantasy that a family could be returned to domestic bliss was extremely popular, making Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's 1868 Spiritualist novel, *The Gates Ajar*, about a heavenly domestic afterlife in a place called "Summerland," a bestseller in its own era.[iv] By the time of the Eddy séances at Chittenden, however, nearly a decade had passed since the war, and the Spiritualist's vision of the afterlife was gradually expanding beyond the domestic.

In observing the cast of specters called to the Eddy's farmhouse there is a peculiar diminishment of the ghosts of Civil War soldiers and departed family members who once dominated circle rooms and séance tables. Instead, the Eddy séances are focused around Native American, Middle Eastern, Asian and African ghosts. Though little has been written about the Eddy farm séances, they have been noted as significant in studies by Anne Braude and Ann Taves as marking the transition from domestic Spiritualism to

international Theosophy. Most often, this shift towards the international is attributed to the arrival of Russian émigré Helena Blavatsky. Blavatsky joined the Eddy's séances after reading Olcott's reports in the *New York Daily Graphic* and quickly began working with Olcott. The two co-founded the Theosophical Society, a group devoted to studying the occult and the world's religions during the following year. Though Blavatsky was undoubtedly significantly influential in the Eddy séances and Olcott's turn towards Theosophy, I would like to suggest that the Russian medium and the ghosts she summoned were so easily accepted because of larger tides of cultural influence that had already primed the Eddy group to seek out spirits remote in time and space.

I attribute the appearance of this more eclectic cast of spirits at the Eddy farm to three main streams of influence. The first is what Brad Evans has referred to as an expanded ethnographic imagination engendered by a rise in print media (especially high culture magazines) in which anthropological reports would be printed alongside articles on high society events. As I will argue, this vogue of foreign cultures contributed to a desire to see, engage with, and possess (or become possessed by) the alterity of foreign spirits. The second major critical lens I will be reading through is Native American scholar Philip Deloria's thesis that in the U.S. costumed Indian play has been ritualistically turned to in times of revolution as a means of regeneration. Looking to the international cast of characters on the Eddy's séance stage, I will be arguing that Deloria's thesis on costuming can be expanded to incorporate ritualistic dress play from a variety of cultures imagined as being remote in time and space. As I will discuss, this ritualistic costuming, inspired in part by what the Eddy group would have been able to

read in contemporary magazines, can also be defined by a third, major vector of influence: technology. The revolution which sparked this Indian play was a reaction not only to print technology or anthropology, but to an age rich with new inventions: the telegraph, the telephone, the expansion of electric lighting, and others which may have seemed, to the lay person, to be the work of magic. To this end, I will be exploring the Eddy group's fascination with ethnographic subjects and technology as characteristic of a kind of antimodern ambivalence.

In *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920*, Brad Evans describes an accelerated exposure to difference beginning in the Gilded Age and extending into the twentieth century. Evans discusses the rise of anthropology as a study to elucidate the ways in which difference became collapsed into a monolithic vision of culture as opposed to cultures. According to Evans, primarily magazines (and also drawing rooms, public spaces, and museums) offered exposure to such cultural difference. On the Eddy farm, one can see this type of cultural variety fused into culture writ large. According to Evans, one main way in which groups like those involved with the Eddy séances first came into contact with difference was through magazines. Indeed, the way the Eddy séances were advertised to the public and recorded was first through *The New York Daily Graphic*. Though it is not a magazine and not high culture, I would suggest that the *Daily Graphic* fits into Evans thesis in a number of ways. Evans uses the example of *Century* magazine, which would feature "pictures of [anthropologist and ethnologist Frank] Cushing in Zuni regalia . . . alongside writing by Henry James" suggesting that a reader might view "culture in its variety of forms as a commodity."[v]

Evans explains that the culling together of groups figured as being primitive, like the Zunis, alongside narratives by the likes of Henry James, came to be viewed as Culture, the consumption of which became a sign of being cultured. Though certainly more lowbrow, the publication in which Olcott wrote about the Eddy séances, *The New York Daily Graphic* was comprised of a similar set of texts: one single issue might report on high society events, foreign expeditions, scientific advancements, and museum openings and fairs. If we can supplant the fiction of Henry James with the announcement of the latest soiree (solely as a signifier of Western culture) then *Centrury* and *The Daily Graphic* can be seen to perform a similar function by plotting the ethnographic alongside high society on a single axis.[1]

Drawing on the criticism of Curtis Hinsley, Evans claims that magazines like *Century* redefined cultural capitol by insisting that value was determined by accruing knowledge of Herderian cultures along lines of Arnoldian progress. To learn about cultures was to become more cultured. To this end, Evans discusses ways in which this impacted literary forms. Evans engages Richard Broadhead's thesis that the popularity of "vacationistic" writing, which Evans sees Cushing's sketchbooks a part of, famously gave rise to local color fiction.[vi] Broadhead claims that such vacationistic prose was only of an elite class of connoisseurs. However, it seems Broadhead is claiming that such publications were valued by these connoisuers because of the novelty and remoteness of

[1] A sample issue of *The New York Daily Graphic* from July 1873 featured news of an artic expedition, the building of an Indian wigwam in an anthropological exhibit and coverage of the transatlantic balloon voyage (the *Daily Graphic* devoted extensive coverage to the last story).

their Herderian subject matter. Reading novelty and remoteness as the primary indexes for cultural value in the day, I find Evans's and Broadheads's theses applicable to *The Daily Graphic.* If we can read Evans's and Broadheads's views on local color fiction like a Venn diagram, as residing at the intersection of travel narrative and ethnographic scientific report, Olcott's writing on the rural outcasted Eddy's sits within the center as much as Cushing's sketches of the Zunis.[2]

At the Eddy séances one finds a special interest in science's capacity to bring the group into contact with people remote in time and space—the Indian, African and Eastern ghosts. Evans refers to the tension created by the desire to work out a climate of extreme cultural variation as the ethnographic imagination, the "experimentation . . . often in the form of aesthetic dalliance, with new ways of perceiving, representing and producing structures of affiliation and difference."[vii] The Eddy's, themselves described as rural outcasts, with their eclectic cast of ghosts, are most certainly working out cultural distinctions and connections in a playfully aesthetic way. At the séances, an emphasis is always placed upon the ecstatic: ebullient dancing, costuming, and changing identity by virtue of becoming inhabited by spirits. With the appearance of each ghost, a playful emphasis on dress is always readily apparent. A squaw's leather moccasins are described, and a Khourdish warrior's battle regalia detailed down to his shoes. I read this emphasis on costuming as both a way to work out difference and increase one's cultural cache in

[2] Though Evans doesn't mention Spiritualists in his study, they were studied in the magazines he mentions, *Century*, as well as *Galaxy* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

terms described by Evans, but also in terms described by Philip Deloria in *Playing Indian*.

In *Playing Indian*, Deloria argues that Indian play can be viewed as a "misrule ritual" which has often been associated with revolutionary cultural and political shifts in America's history; moreover, he argues that such play serves to bring about a sense of regeneration.[viii] Because Indian play is decontextualizing by nature, I find that the costuming of African and Oriental spirits also fits within Deloria's thesis. In this paper, I am arguing that it was the rapid modernization of the Gilded Age which inspired the variety of costume play performed on the Eddy séance stage.

One effect of modernization which the Eddy group (and Spiritualists at large) found particularly troubling was the funneling of broader scientific inquiry into more systematized lines of research. Feeling alienated by this kind of regimented structure, Olcott and the Eddys turned to foreign ghosts in the mode of playful dalliance referred to by Evans and Deloria not only as a means to work out difference, but also as a way to revivify what seemed an age out of touch with spiritual concerns. In this way, the summoning of foreign ghosts is also the result of a third tide of influence – antimodern ambivalence, discussed by Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace.* Lears suggests that antimodernism has been marked by a complex blend of "accommodation and protest . . . not simply escapism; it was . . . often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress."[ix] Throughout his narrative, Olcott demonstrates such ambivalence via his disapproval of the scientific establishment which he views as overly preoccupied with

unimportant matters[3] leaving questions about the human soul unanswered. At the same time, Olcott uses telephonic and telegraphic devices to make contact with the spirit world -- tools derivative of those created by that same establishment.

A number of scholars in recent years have tried to explain the appearance of Indian and foreign ghosts at séance tables as a kind of cross-cultural Spiritualist engagement -- a sign of renewed moral and civic responsibility. John Kucich's *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* and Robert S. Cox's *Body and Soul: A sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* have all engaged questions of race, nation and activism among Spiritualists and favored a recuperative view in uncovering what they read as the counterculture's activist sentiments. Given that I favor Lears's thesis of antimodern ambivalence and Evans's ethnographic imagination in their applications to Olcott's narrative, I find that engagement with Indian, Oriental and African ghosts at the Eddy séances has little to do with any sort of genuine empathic, moral or civic responsibility as these critics have suggested. Rather than take a recuperative stance, I find it more compelling to read antimodern ambivalence, costumed ritualistic play and the ethnographic imagination as the primary engines behind what might have appeared to be empathetically motivated activism. Refusing to view the Eddy séances as engendering legitimate activism leaves more room for insight into their culture and offers a clearer

[3] Such as "nonsensical debates upon the fly-catching flower" *People from the Other World* vii

picture of one way in which civic engagement is occluded by a form of essentialism practiced at the Eddy séances.

The roots of the essentialism present in Olcott's *People from the Other World,* however, are planted deeper than what eventually emerged amidst these tides of influence which I have mentioned on the Eddy stage. Even as a young man, Olcott, like many people of his day, was fascinated by what he perceived to be the arcane mysteries of the Orient and the ways in which occult sciences could offer improvements to the modern world.[4] In his first agricultural treatise in which he sought out an ancient and superior substitute for sugar cane in Africa and Asia titled *Sorgho and Imphee* (1857) Olcott warns against becoming invested in any "New Discoveries." Such discoveries, he explains, are in fact "rediscoveries."[x] The project of seeking to revivify a product used at an earlier age shows, on the one hand strong antimodern sentiment, and on the other, a diffusionist impulse to understand contemporary products as having their origin in cradles of civilization. This notion that new inventions are in fact reinventions of ancient ones is what compelled Olcott, Blavatsky and the Eddys to insist that Indian ghosts, a Khourdian warrior, and an Egyptian juggler were the ones on the other end of the "Spiritual telegraph."

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[4] Though most histories of the Theosophical society focus on Blavatsky as the Cosmopolitan traveler, her less-discussed partner, Olcott spent a time in his early twenties living in Africa. He was a student of agriculture and he came to the continent seeking out a new type of sugar cane. Having read about a sweet reed described by authors of ancient African and Asian texts, he insisted that the original plant used for sweetening was imphee, and published a book on the subject in 1875, encouraging U.S. growers to return to using it. I find this anecdote significant because it encapsulates the kind of antimodern[4] sentiments present in Olcott's day coupled with an obsession with peoples remote in space and time.

Olcott utilizes this same teleological, diffusionist logic wheh he describes the advent of the telegraph in the final chapters of *People from the Other World*. [5] "What a curious law of creation;" he muses, "how beneficent and wise, that every human want seems to be provided for at the proper time!" He then moves through a list of "miracles" like the emergence of coal which stopped the threat of deforestation, before concluding that the latest "desideratum" provided "beneficently" for the "development of humankind" is the electric telegraph which has come "to unite all the people of the earth together in a constant, heaven-descended tie."[xi]

Thanks to this new telegraph and this new age of discovery, Olcott prophesies that "We are about to be blinded, by the great new light that is to pour upon us from the 'gates ajar.'" He says, "Let us at least console ourselves that we are only getting back to where our ancestors and the ancestors of the whole race stood from remotest ages."[xii] With the words "gates ajar" Olcott evokes the title of the bestselling Spiritualist novel by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, in which heaven is a place where families are reunited in domestic bliss. Olcott, however, has expanded Phelps's domestic framework to conceive of family not as

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[5] The Spiritual telegraph was the "divine" system through which mediums received messages from spirits in the "other world." Far from a metaphor, it was figured quite literally, with mediums strapping themselves down to chairs and boards so that their bodies could better serve as conduits for the ancient spirits. The Fox sisters were the first to use the system in which numbers of raps stood in for letters of the alphabet (one rap for "A" and so on).[5] This desire to associate the telegraph with the afterlife was not just isolated within the Spiritualist community. On May 24, 1844, Ms. Ellsworth, the daughter of the commissioner of patents, was the one to send the first message on Samuel Morse's telegraph machine. Her chosen words were: "What hath God wrought?"[5] Another Christian, Ezra Garnett voiced a similar perspective in1858 "The most remarkable effect . . . [of the telegraph] will be the approach to a practical unity of the human race; of which we have never yet had a foreshadowing, except in the gospel of Christ."[5]

an immediate nuclear unit, but as something much broader conceived along a diffusionist vision of inherited culture. For Olcott, the advent of the telegraph presages the reunification of humans with their earliest ancestors. Finally, revealing that he is compelled as much by an antimodern sentiment as a diffusionist impulse, Olcott writes that one should recognize that modern inventions might also be the product of "distant and scarcely known people of our own day."[xiii] By comparing ancient ancestors to people who are merely remote and unknown, Olcott suggests that those currently living in rural places are in closer connection to an earlier period in time.

Olcott tends to understand culture teleologically, and insists in his lectures that all Spiritual wisdom emerged from the Himalayas. However, he finds himself particularly preoccupied with uncovering the magic of what he refers to as Aryan culture. In spite of its focus on travel and the international, *People from the Other World*'s most detailed account is of the Eddy family's ancient Scottish lineage. In this historical moment, when cultures were beginning to be perceived as culture, Olcott's emphasis on the Eddy's ancient European family serves as a more direct example of the ways in which identification with remoteness slides into an identification with culture conceived of as primitive. Such diffusionist impulses are primarily motivated by a desire to be viscerally connected to all things ancient: one of the primary motives behind Olcott's antimodern ethnography.

In this piece, I will refer to an article by diffusionist ethnographer Daniel Brinton on "Popular Superstitions of Europe" published in the magazine *Century* as an illustration of the ways in which diffusionist thought comfortably lent itself to such antimodern

impulses. Not a pure ethnographic report, Brinton's piece is entertaining and reveals a similar preoccupation with the kind of savagery evidenced in Olcott's narrative. Such impulses as the desire to see oneself as savage seem to contradict teleological notions of progress held by diffusionists. By focusing on both the primitive and rural, Olcott and Brinton address the antimodern angst of their readership through a pseudo-ethnographic formulation.

Brinton's entertaining piece is primarily about ghosts and haunting, a topic seemingly chosen for its overlap with the lives of readers in nineteenth-century America. When Brinton mentions the "divided nature" of ancient man on the astral plane,[xiv] he might as well be writing about modernity along lines described by Lears or Olcott. In his article, Brinton goes so far as to claim that he has seen ghosts, but then insists that such play is best left to premodern cultures and that modern séances are pure chicanery. Brinton also mentions Spiritualism in his article, showing that both are in a shared conversation about ghostliness and a divided modern consciousness, although both purport to come at the problem with different scientific methodologies. For diffusionist ethnographers like Brinton, the study of folktales and ghost stories was a way of working out difference and perhaps antimodern ambivalence in a way very similar to what is seen in Olcott's narrative.

The Eddy séances themselves frequently served as performances of travel narratives, a genre popular in magazines of the day. Most ghosts summoned to the Eddy séances had a story to accompany them, and many were spirits of living men whom Blavatsky had met on her travels through ancient holy sites. When Blavatsky engages

with these spirits, they serve to illustrate her own level of experience abroad. These ghosts, who always wear elaborate costumes, seem to serve, for Blavatsky, as a kind of souvenir illustrating and proving the validity of her travel narrative. For the audience, such narratives and artifacts were blurred in a single performance.

The ghosts at the Eddy séances, with their stories of African sorcery and Georgian peasant life, are folk fabrications, piecemeal collations of bits of ethnographic studies fused with willful fantasy into a performance of a ghostly travel narrative. Hippolyte Taine has suggested that literature is an artifact in itself—a product of nation, environment and time. At the end of the nineteenth century, Evans points out that cultural objects, especially literature, had become detached from their cultures of origin, as a result of print culture and technological mediation, becoming absorbed across linguistic and geographic barriers. Thus, stories which were particularly effective were ones which somehow came from afar but purported to belong to the readers themselves, like folk tales. In this instance, the emphasis was always in finding a way to affectively knit the distant subject to the audience.[6]

Evans notes that it was seemingly unauthored objects, like folk tales, which had a particular strength in getting the reader "'caught up' in the narrative" to make it a part of themselves despite its foreignness. This was especially effective in diffusionist folklore like Brinton's account of the ghost stories of ancient Europeans, because it was implied that the messages imparted were somehow revealing a distant part of the reader's own

[6] Evans uses the example of the Uncle Remus Stories allegedly collected from ex-slaves in Georgia by Joel Chandler Harris who claimed the tales were "a part of the domestic history of every Southern Family" (Evans 15).

psyche. When Olcott suggests that the telegraph is in fact bringing his readers back to the ancestors of distant ages, he is playing on this very same framework of modernity, nostalgia and diffusionist rootedness. In Olcott's ghostly report one finds the same diffusionist impulses and Herderian influences frequently found in regionalist fiction. The Eddy group's séances indicate their fascination with technology and its ability to bring them into contact with what they saw as Herderian forms of culture. Written in the model of these ethnographic reports and local color surveys, *People from the Other World* is itself a kind of self-serving antimodern ethnographic study.

Diffusionist Ethnography and the Construction of Folk Culture on the Séance Stage

Olcott describes *People from the Other World* as a "bibliography of Occult sciences"[xv] a kind of reference book for those in the public seeking a way to understand the haunted nature of their own modern existence. "Folkore," he says, is a "cognate" to the science of Spiritualism.[xvi] The kind of folklore Olcott seems to have had in mind was diffusionist. Diffusionists ascribed to an orthogenetic view of evolution by which all culture could be traced back to cradles of civilization, thus any culture still existing in or near such cradles represented a phase of Western culture in its earlier development. Resultantly, folk tales would resemble each other across the ages, because they shared a common ancestral author. The idea of a universal connectedness to a primitive past was appealing to the audience at the Eddy séances because it implied that the past could become accessible through such tales. Olcott's diffusionism was often distorted because he conducted his work with the intent of finding savage cultures which could put him into touch with him own savage nature. Olcott and Blavatsky would refer to themselves as

"heathen" in interviews.[7] Diffusionist ethnographer Daniel Brinton sums up this attitude when he states that despite "the alleged progress of man . . . each man remains the pristine savage that his remote ancestor was."[xvii] Though diffusionists trace folk tales back to cradles of civilization, Brinton's piece is on the civilization of ancient Europe -- a transitional point between Eastern "savagery" and Western "civilization." In both Olcott's emphasis on the Eddy's ancient Scottish lineage, and Brinton's attention to folk myths of ancient Europeans, it is posited that within every modern reader there is a dualism between savagery and civilization.

In his lectures, Olcott shows a strong fascination in such a dualism. He discusses Spiritual wisdom as a "fertilizing stream . . . [which] flowed through Grecian and Egyptian channels towards the West."[xviii] Olcott claims that "since science has proved . . . Aryan and European civilization flowed from a single fount" reenergizing oneself at the "parent fount" was healthful and necessary[xix] In his study of antimodern ambivalence, Lears corroborates that "by returning to the 'primitive springs' . . . at the weekend cottage, citizens of the urban sphere could 'refresh themselves for more effective action in the workaday world.'"[xx]

Unmoored from any historical context, and valued solely for this revivifying purpose, folk tales became peculiarly detached artifacts—if a visit to the Eddy farm was a holiday into one's primitive past, the folk tale was the souvenir. At the Eddy homestead, ghosts are connected interchangeably to both stories and artifacts. Olcott relates a number

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[7] In one particular article from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* Monday, December 23, 1878; pg. 2; Issue 216 "The Mysterous Priestess Goes Back to Her Beloved Heathen" Blavatsky claims that she is returning to India to be in the company of heathens, who she prefers to civilized people.

of tales in which ghosts speak to their ancestors and strangers to lead them to heirlooms and artifacts like jewels under baseboards, and bronze swords buried under the earth. According to Olcott, even the thirteenth canto of Dante's *Paradiso* was uncovered after Dante's ghost came to his son, Pietro Alighieri and disclosed the location under a panel by a windowsill.[xxi] The audience at the séances would have engaged with these artifacts in a number of ways. The mediums would verbally describe them, or actually display the artifact for the audience. *People from the Other World* is filled with illustrations which corroborate with Olcott's narrative, including an image of the brass sword revealed to the Eddys, the Eddy grandmother's snuff box and necklace which her ghost led her grandsons to uncover, and other oddities. Such stories create a dialogue between intangible narratives and material culture.

For all of the effort Olcott takes to prove these artifacts' validity, such as having them illustrated in his narrative, and sharing them with the audience, most are totally historically decontextualized – like the brass sword. In Olcott's narrative ancient relics and heirlooms becomes equivalently significant for their connection to the past, and the spirit world. Evans discusses the ways in which folklorists were able to reconfigure these tales historically and anthropologically because of their detachment. For the Eddy group, the narratives shared by ghosts functioned in two ways. Primarily, folk tales and narratives offered a connection to the premodern ancestors, and secondarily they were connected to physical artifacts themselves.

Decontextualized pre-modern artifacts became subject to all kinds of interpretations. Evans claims that in this climate, local color writers took renewed

creative license, writing consciously in the manner of anthropologists documenting strange and remote customs in the rural U.S. According to Evans, alongside the rise of anthropology as a discipline, "local color fiction" became "the dominant modality of the day." I would add that rural peoples, especially the Eddy's, were turned to as a revivifying force equivalent to any artifact or folk tale for Olcott. This connection between the rural country mediums and the ancestors of the race becomes especially apparent when we bear in mind Olcott's earlier proclamation that new inventions were either reinventions of the ancients or of "a far distant and scarcely known people of our own day." Thus, Olcott self-consciously crafts *People from the Other World* in this diffusionist, local color genre because he and his audience would have seen parallels between the ancients and rural townsfolk. He recounts literal ecstatic slippages between the ancient ghosts and the Eddys to suggest their underlying relation.

The reciprocity between folk tales and artifacts, and the ways in which culture is appropriated and reorganized on the Eddy stage suggests that ethnographic theories can be performed or displayed. In the late-nineteenth century, a patron strolling through the Natural History Museum would have found various artifacts grouped by type rather than region, musical instruments ordered together to demonstrate various levels of advancement, or weapons designed to show the same. Visitors would have seen a vision of culture which was also implied at the Eddy's séances: that emerging from one parent "fount" humans evolved towards western "progress." This was the method utilized by the Natural History museum's curator Otis T. Mason. It remained this way until Franz Boas asserted that "a rattle may be a primitive musical instrument in one area, but a complex

religious symbol somewhere else."[xxii] Emphasizing context above all, Boas went so far as to reconstruct entire dwellings in his exhibitions to bring the public into a totally submerged encounter. Context, then, was the main principle of organization at odds with diffusionism. In an era when the telegraph and camera invited one to remove context, it makes sense that diffusionism would thrive within the Eddy group.

Combining the realistic submersion of Boas, with the self-serving diffusionist focus of the Natural History Museum's curator, Otis T. Mason, the Eddys recreated ethnographic engagements for the purpose of staging encounters not with an emphasis on the foreign and domestic, but with an emphasis on the past and present. Whether in the woods near the Eddy property or in the circle room of their home, the mediums paid little attention to Boasian detail because diffusionism gave them license not to while remaining "scientific." At their séances they had spirits of Indians playing banjos, wearing Oriental jewels like that "from a Rajah's turban,"[xxiii] or dancing like "oriental Almeh."[xxiv] Some of the Eddy's stages (they had multiple set up around their property) submerged their audiences, almost like Boasian dioramas, but were of course, completely at odds with his attention to detail in their varied and eclectic construction.

All of these stages were located in, or around the woods near the Eddy home. Olcott describes one of these outdoor stages as being in a ravine near a creek. The illustration of the stage in Olcott's text shows benches set in a semi-circle around a rocky enclosure. In front of this, a rustic wood branched curtain demarcates the stage area. This, the audience is told, is the "rude apartment" of the squaw Honto, one of the Eddy's familiars (or most frequently appearing spirit). Olcott explains that her "apartment" is a

"cave… like the one in Central Park," in that it "is formed by two great rocks leaning together." By correlating an Indian home with Central Park, Olcott reveals that he is speaking to a readership whose only common referent for nature might be in the midst of Manhattan. Itself a kind of antidote to modern angst, the invocation of Central Park, the cave and Olcott's narrative all speak to the enervating effects of the urban sphere, and the idea that nature and the primitive are linked. The cave is described as primeval, "so shrouded in foliage that the cheerful sunlight scarcely penetrates the spot even at high noon." Away from the sun it is removed from the progress of time, and within this originary cave sparkles the revivifying fount so often referenced by diffusionists. "A clear mountain brook running through it ceaselessly awakens its tiny echoes," as if to signify an echoing plethora of cultures emerging from a single source. The residues of culture can be found in "the surface of its rocky walls," which have been "scarred in so curious a manner as to convey the impression that the furrows are the half-effaced inscriptions of some pre-historic people."[xxv] The vagueness and resultant mutability of the artifact is what stands out here. Olcott's writing plays to overactive imaginations. With an ambiguity reminiscent of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," the writing could be that of real Indians, or it may be an apparition. What makes the scratches significant to Olcott is their presumed remote distance in space and time, and simultaneously their very haunting ability to tell the reader something about themselves, as these "half-effaced inscriptions" are what rests closest to the symbolic originary fount.

I read the performance of this encounter with the Indian cave along what Evans calls a binary of "expansion and nostalgia" one in which, antimodern angst is cured by

the restorative powers of "Other people" (most often figured as Indian at the Eddy séances).[xxvi] However, Evans draws on the criticism of Curtis Hinsley to say that there is more going on outside of this binary; that the overriding function is to find "a reassurance of good intentions" and "better selves."[xxvii] To make this point he draws upon the magazine *Century's* evangelical beginnings and then posits two views of culture: the one posed by the German literary critic Johann Herder in which one ought to embrace folk culture which views all human products as growing organically and timelessly like "flowers in a field," the other, Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as progress, "constantly in motion . . . constantly moving forward."[xxviii] According to Evans, magazines like *Century* afforded their readers a unique opportunity to do both. By reading more about folk culture, audiences felt they were advancing. Though of course Arnold would not view Native American cave etchings as culture, it satisfied at least a part of his definition via his emphasis on progress.

Although *Century* was edited by literary connoisseurs like Howells, *The Daily Graphic* was also aimed at expanding awareness of scientific advances. Furthermore, this thesis fits particularly well with Olcott's writng as the rhetoric of the Theosophical Society is suffused with knowledge of Herderian culture as a mode of progress (e.g., Blavatsky's return to her "heathen" Indians as a means of improving oneself[8]). Olcott's account of the Eddy séances adds a strange twist to this tripartite formulation of progress, nostalgia and self-improvement. Olcott tacitly couples the philosophies of Herder and

[8] *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* Monday, December 23, 1878; pg. 2; Issue 216 "The Mysterous Priestess Goes Back to Her Beloved Heathen"

Arnold (again, solely in terms of accumulation as a sign of progress) in his writing, but does so because he believed that the collapse of time was imminent, and his vision has been engendered largely by technology. In this strange puzzle, the Eddy séances present a vision of achieving Arnoldian progress through moving backwards to Herderian culture. Olcott writes about society as actually moving back to ancient times by virtue of technological advancements. In other words, the camera and telegraph are read as rewinding a unilinear trajectory, bringing mankind into a virtuous state of more complete connectedness with orthogenetic roots.

One of the specific ways in which this odd synthesis between Herderian folk culture and Arnoldian progress was realized was through collecting narratives as if they were actual journeys one had taken oneself. To read a Spiritualist publication was to immediately open the pages to the journeys and worlds which were always about oneself. At one particular séance at the Eddy farm, after the Indian spirits danced, there emerged the ghost of William White, the recently deceased editor of the publication *Banner of Light*, carrying in hand a copy of the publication which he edited in life. Olcott calls *Banner* "the principle organ to the new creed" which, with its "publication of thirty-five successive volumes had . . . [become] familiar to thousands of persons."[xxix] The display itself seems to suggest that *Banner* is a kind of foreign newspaper. Regularly featuring letters to the editor and articles by ghosts, *Banner* offers a touristic journey and becomes an object from the other world. The theme of travel was so prevalent among Spiritualists that one critic said that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's Spiritualist novel *Beyond the Gates* read more like "the travel report of an urban planner than the raptures of a visionary."[xxx]

Describing the clean wide streets, the perfect libraries and public gardens, Phelps marvels at "places of shelter for travelers such as I had never seen in the most advanced and benevolent of cities below."[xxxi] Increasingly, the emphasis became bodies in transit, and in literalized travel, which makes sense considering that the same technologies which fascinated Spiritualists like the telegraph and camera seemed to make a collapse of time and space possible.

When the recent émigré, Helena Blavatsky emerged at the séances she immediately became a figure of interest because of her exotic world travels. Claiming to be a medium herself, well-versed in the arcane secrets of the Orient, the Eddy's allowed her a turn at summoning ghosts. Demonstrating the extent to which the rhetoric of tourism had shaped the ideology of the Eddy group, the first ghost summoned by Blavatsky, Safar Ali, a Khourd Warrior, had been Blavatsky's former tour guide who led her around Mount Arrarat in the summer of 1851. According to Olcott, he "walked out of William Eddy's cabinet in the form of a materialized spirit, dressed to the minutest detail, as she last saw him in Asia."[xxxii] Arrarat, a holy ancient site for Christians, is believed to be the place where Noah's Ark first landed, making it especially significant for diffusionists as well, since Biblical history marks it as one potential origin point for all life. Blavatsky, like Olcott visiting Africa, had to have already had this history in mind when visiting the locale and sought it out for its value as a holy site. The fact that the spirit reemerges "exactly" as he was on Mount Arrarat also shows one way in which this séance functions as the performance of a travel narrative, almost as a reproduced photograph accompanying an ethnographic report.

One aspect which is odd about Blavatsky and Safar Ali's encounter is that no inquiry about his death is made. In fact, almost none of the ghosts, unless they had been direct family members or wrongfully killed, were ever asked about the circumstances of their death. It might seem especially odd in the case of Blavatsky and Safar Ali, since according to the narrative, they were acquainted long enough to remember each other. 1851 had been a mere 23 years ago, and so it is possible the man died surprisingly young. It seems death does not even emerge as a question because the ghost mainly serves as a sublimation of technological gifts and the rapidity with which one can experience other cultures thanks to the telegraph or camera.

In his article on beliefs in ghosts shared by "primitive" people around the world, Brinton suggests that "Ghosts are supposed to be 'disembodied spirits'; but neither primitive man nor present believers hold that the body from which they come must be a dead one." According to Brinton, such engagements between distant living entities can occur within "what Theosophs call the astral body" something which is "recognized by all savages." According to Brinton, this happens most often while the person is sleeping, and the astral body is free to embark on "strange adventures. It is gifted with such powers of swiftness that space offers no obstacle, and time to come is to it one with time present."[xxxiii] Although he was against what he saw as the pseudo-science of Spiritualism, Brinton entertains the vocabulary of the Spiritualist's "astral plane" to describe "savage" Spirituality, equating the two. Simultaneously, his study of remote peoples seems to suggest human presence broadcast long distances on a telegraph, where one's body can be far away but one's message can be close, or emerging telephonic technology where a

disembodied voice can be heard. Since Blavatsky's Khourdish tour guide appears "exactly" as he did on her vacation, and because he remains mute throughout their engagement, a photograph is also a likely precedent for this strange vision. If folk tales, artifacts and people were all floating with equal weight in the cultural economy, it makes sense that one could experience a photograph as being as real a form of contact as hearing a story, or viewing a performance.

The division between artifact, folk myth and performance is further blurred with the appearance of the spirit of an African juggler, another man whom Blavatsy had met on her relatively recent travels in Egypt. Though he stands in front of the audience, Blavatsky uses the opportunity to retell a folk tale from his tribe which was related to her during her journey by a dignitary named Elias Effendi who resided in Mis-Massia. Olcott claims that he has recorded it because the tale "is well worth preserving, as a match to the Grecian mythological fable of Europe."[xxxiv] Olcott refers to the maiden in the story as an "African Europa," the bride of Zeus from Greek mythology.[xxxv] Olcott must have had in mind the story of Europa's abduction in which Zeus, falling in love with the young woman, disguised himself as a tame bull, lured her onto his back for a ride, and galloped and swam until he reached the isle of Crete where he made her queen. The narrative retold by Olcott is loosely similar. In the tale, a sorcerer from a village in Egypt offers to bring a forlorn woman, Esma, the affection of a man who used to be her lover. All the sorcerer needs is a lock of her lover's hair to make him return. Esma sends her 12 year-old brother on the errand who, unable to find her lover, instead returns with a bull's hair. Not being a "clairvoyant" the sorcerer performs the magic anyway. This same bull which

was to be slaughtered the next day appears as a reanimated hide with magic at Esma's door and smothers her to death. [xxxvi]

What finally validates the legitimacy of the tale for Madame Blavatsky is a bull hide which Effendi shows her, claiming this is the selfsame creature which smothered Esma to death. The function of this piece of evidence is twofold. On the one hand, it illustrates the Spiritualist's at the Eddy seances willingness to link oral culture with material culture, the textual with the performative. In another sense, it shows a subculture of master collectors, a community of consumers willfully fusing cultural artifacts and tales. These tales are appealing in large part because they are told at a far remove (Effendi himself being a "dignitary" who "resides" in Mis-Massia, but does not originate from there). Above all, it is the ability to reach across time and space which offers reassuring proof of an afterlife within this life to Spiritualists. This being the case, it makes sense that the elongated accounts of who-told-who are in themselves proof of a human's ability to transcend time and space and this proof is what make the tales valuable artifacts.

After sharing Elias Effendi's story, Olcott references a ghost story by regionalist writer George Lunts before switching gears again, utilizing French Egyptologist François Joseph Chabas' theories of magic which he reads alongside French poet and singer Salverte's "Sciences Occultes: ou Essai sur La Magic." In dizzily transitioning from poets to Egyptologists to regionalists to African dignitaries, Olcott demonstrates the kind of "ethnographic imagination" at play in the Spiritualist's sphere of influence. However, this kind of blurring between art and science was not solely the misguided methodology

of Olcott or a handful of Spiritualists. Rather, it revealed the patterns of acceptable modes of pseudo-scientific inquiry of a very broad consumer base of a type of autodidactic culture. In other words, the consumers who read publications like *The Daily Graphic*, would uncover news of expeditions like the transatlantic balloon voyage of 1873 alongside social commentary and announcements.[9] All of these would be blended and suffused in their minds as generally self-improving pieces of an overall educational picture.

Perhaps most significantly, this knowledge was intended to entertain, making education into a pleasurable journey. Olcott uses the appearance of the African Juggling ghost as segue to, and somewhat of a stand-in for, all of the knowledge of magic in Africa. Thus, learning about Africa allowed the audience to imagine themselves in the position of the diffusion folklorist or Egyptologist, culling bits of knowledge here and there which they, in turn, could relate back to their own lives. Olcott's little "tour" of Egypt is filled with claims he has collected from British Orientalist and translator Edward William Lane. Utilizing Lane's "Modern Egyptians, Vol. 2" from the "Library of Entertaining Knowledge"[10] Olcott describes two types of magic in Egypt. One is natural

[9] Taken from *New York Daily Graphic* July 1873. That summer the graphic devoted a series of issues to the transatlantic voyage.

[10] Lane's *Modern Egyptians* which plays on this admixture of folkloric and ethnographic detail is recommended by Olcott to his readers for their perusal. Olcott's readership may well have been familiar with the series which Lane's text came from, The Library of Entertaining Knowledge. The Library of Entertaining Knowledge began in the UK and was the product of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. The series was quickly adopted by Americans involved in the Lyceum movement where it became a platform for educating the general public in all matters deemed scientific and generally useful under the same name. This series offered simplified lessons, via mass-publishing and its target audience was a group with little to no previous understanding of scientific principles. Olcott seems to have had a similar reading public in mind with his own work given *People's* extensive bibliography and repeated reference to other fairly simplistic to read Occult texts.

or "deceptive" magic which derives from "perfumes and drugs," and the other is "spiritual" magic which derives from the "agency of angels and genii." Olcott may have favored this binary because it describes magic in the exact way which he does in the preface to *People.* One type of "magic" is chicanery, the kind which Olcott is painfully defensive about after the scientific establishment has accused himself and other Spiritualists of being guilty of such deception. The second type of magic is of "angels and genii," the "good" kind which authentically comes from the Other World, a space populated by a multicultural host of helpful entities.[xxxvii] The angel and the genii can inhabit the same realm because both are read through a diffusionist lens, as serving the same function for a host of different cultures who believe in them. In a sweeping gesture, Olcott concludes his tour of Egypt remarking that the "wise men" of America may someday embrace the Eddy brother's brand of magic as equivalent to the "spiritual" form of magic rather than the "deceptive" kind.[xxxviii]

At the end of the chapter, Olcott reveals that his other "reference" text, has been Lane's tremendously popular translation of *One Thousand and One Nights.* In a reference which runs temporally both backwards and forwards in collapsed time and space, Olcott says that Scheherezade's tales are filled with stories like the ones which he has just related, and that the genii has served Solomon in the past, and in the future may become the slave of "whomsoever may wear the mystic ring, or rub the rusty lamp."[xxxix] Though the magic itself is ephemeral, it is the artifact which leads one back to the evanescent source of power. The "mystic ring" or the "rusty lamp" will reveal secrets to whoever

understands such a relic's true value. In Olcott's narrative, stories shared by the Eddys at their séances work in tandem with artifacts. For Blavatsky, the carcass of the actual bull which suffocated Esma solidifies the story's truthfulness, in the same way that artifacts shared at the Eddy séances bring the narratives into the third dimension.

In the process of studying folklore, diffusionists removed tales from their place of original performance. Taken away from the cultures that originally created them, they became disembodied artifacts which could move with "more or less alacrity from one locale to the next."[xl] Thus rapid movement of the intangible figured as a cultural object might be read along lines described by Spiritualists as "materialization." "Materialization" refers to the wondrous way in which anything (humans, artifacts, etc.) could compose and "redissolve into the impalpable atoms of which [they were], a moment before, composed" at will.[xli] For Spiritualists, the "disembodiment" that Evans speaks of with regard to folk tales as cultural objects was literalized and became the crucial point of focus. Though Evans attributes disembodiment to ethnographic study, technological innovations served as the main model for this type of cultural unmooring at the Eddy seances. At the Eddy séances, "collecting" or witnessing foreign ghosts becomes an experience equivalent to acquiring an artifact or a folk tale. The "people" or ghosts from the Other World become cultural tokens, objects whose value is equivalent to any artifact because of the vast distance traversed. It is the power to collapse distance which matters most in such a cultural economy.

In this way, collecting artifacts becomes akin to collecting stories. As such, the folkloric tradition itself is a cobbling together of pieces of tales, whittled down to their

essentials which allow them to become filters for some glint of magic which the folklorist determines, whether it be a truth about ghosts, the afterlife, or some other folk belief found to be translatable to the modern world. It is the diffusionist perspective which allows Olcott to read the tale about Esma and the bull's carcass as analogous to Europa's kidnapping by Zeus, or of angels and geniis as coexisting in a singular faith system. By extending the magic of the genii across all directions in time and space, Olcott evokes the kind of collapsed history that the technology of the telegraph and camera had engendered—a sense that all of history could co-exist in single moment because its essential teachings shared a monogenetic origin. It is this confluence of folkloric essentialism, coupled with technological simultaneity that authorized Olcott's claims and led the Eddy group to couple people remote in space and time with the new modes of technological "materialization": the telegraph and camera.

Haunted Technology

Folk tales like the ones mentioned by Blavatsky were themselves artifacts valued for the distance they had traveled in time and space. In retelling, they were often enhanced by their connection to related artifacts like the rusted lamp, the bull's hide or the mystic ring. Like folk tales, accounts of the afterlife were often read as trips through time and space, so it makes sense that one would look for some kind of equivalent souvenir to prove that their journey did in fact happen. One technology favored for registering these ecstatic adventures was the spirit photo. One of these spirit photos of particular interest to the ethnographic imagination was taken by infamous spirit photographer William Mumler and appeared in the occult scientific journal *Human*

Nature. The original caption informs us that the image is of Master Herrod, of N. Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and "shows three spirits standing behind him—a European, an Indian and a Negro."[xlii] Master Herrod's father says "my son has been controlled a few months, and before coming here a spirit took possession of him, and said if he would come to your studio, three spirits would show themselves representing Europe, Africa and America."[xliii] The young boy in the photo appears to be between the age of eleven and fourteen and the three "spirits" behind him are nearly unrecognizable from overexposure. Only the dimmest defining features can distinguish the African as having slightly darker skin and the Indian who has feathers or feather-like protrusions in his silhouette, for being what the caption claims they are. The European is almost indistinguishable from the overexposed background.

Though never successfully proven, many suspected that Mumler utilized "sweaty glass" or, a glass negative which had been exposed twice to produce his images. Hired actors (or possibly even Mumler himself) could don an Indian costume, blackface, and European clothes, exposing the negative plate to the images at intervals. This tokenistic gathering of delegates of the race demonstrates that for the spiritualists, like diffusionist ethnographers, identities were insignificant compared to race. At one point during *People from the Other World* Olcott shows the hair of Honto's ghost to a 14-year old boy who claimed to be a medium in order to test the accuracy of the boy's powers and Honto's existence simultaneously. Upon trying to guess the name of the ghost, the boy runs through a series of trials and errors, "Pahontus? – Pahotus? –what do you say it is? Ah! Yes—*Honto*—that's it."[xliv] This guessing game makes it clear that Honto, is of course,

derivative from the most mythologized "helpful Indian" in American history – Pocahontas. According to Olcott, finding the correct name is trivial. He quips, ""I doubt very much if 'Santum' or either of the other names are of genuine Indian origin, but that does not trouble me as much as to know if any spirit is standing in my presence. . . individual identities are of trivial importance in comparison with that."[xlv] Overall it is the authenticity of the Indian ghost's ethnicity that matters for Olcott, not their ability to be known or engaged with as individuals. In this kind of culture, Indian ghosts could stand in for entire continents as seen in Master Herrod's spirit photo.

Up until the 1890s, Evans writes, "one could speak of race as a synonym for the nation, just as one could speak in Lamarckian terms of the inheritance of social characteristics,' there being a basic conflation of terms."[xlvi] In the spirit photo of Master Herrod and on the Eddy farm, race becomes a kind of marker of culture in various phases of evolution. Along diffusionist lines, certain races are seen as "older," and thus, behind other races in making changes. The idea that ethnicity is seen to produce one's culture can be seen in the equivalent values Spiritualists grant to Honto's hair and the shawls she produces on stage. All are treated as cultural artifacts. In equating Honto's shawls with her hair as equal signifiers of Indian authenticity, Spiritualists at the Eddy séances demonstrate that for them, culture was generally Herderian, flowing from Indians naturally. *Human Nature* the publication in which the image of Master Herrod appeared was devoted to a number of other sciences like phrenology and palmistry which dictated that one's outer form defined one's inner life.

Evans argues that race diverged from culture in the period of reconstruction, with legal cases over master-slave relations. In this historical moment, the Eddy séances appear willfully nostalgic for an ancient past as they summon Egyptians from Africa but not African Americans to the Eddy farm. The very collapse of time and space made an essentialist vision of race the dominant lens for viewing difference, and negated the possibility for contemporary civic engagement. Many scholars, however, have attempted to argue that Spiritualism in general served as a platform for increased civic engagement. Playing on the notion that séances encouraged actual empathic identification, and offered a platform for otherwise silenced minorities; critics like John Kucich, Molly McGarry and Robert Cox have argued that séances led to political activism, and that the political role of the Spiritualist community has been unexplored. In *Ghostly Communion*, John Kucich argues that séances were actual "cross-cultural contact zones."[xlvii] Scholars like Molly McGarry suggest that what began as fascination led to lived engagement by connecting rallying cries to Indian reform among Spiritualists with their abolitionist commitments.[xlviii] To McGarry, the cry for representation and justice in the Spiritualist press in the aftermath of events like the Sioux uprising count as political engagement. However, even when Indians were represented in Spiritualist papers like *Banner of Light* the "Indians" speaking were still ghosts (One of the most vocal Indian ghost being that of King Phillip). Undoubtedly, the Spiritualist's obsession made white audiences curious to engage with Native Americans and other cultures, but even critics who want to view Spiritualists in such cross-cultural contact are hard-pressed to find evidence of a lived conversation.

More likely, it seems that contact with ghosts of other races in spirit photos and at séance circles served to create a deep sense of connectedness to the audience's selves rather than communication. Part of the revivifying experience of the Eddy séance was not just coming into contact with rural folk, but of engaging with another race seen as more primitive than oneself in order to re-establish contact with one's own primitive core. As Olcott relates, the mediums would often dance for an hour or more before séance meetings. In dancing, one of the Eddy brothers "holds his arms somewhat akimbo, his head back and to one side, and his stomach projected;" Olcott informs the reader that this absurd posture is taken in imitation the ghost of Honto, who dances with them "like that of a Zingala or an Oriental almeh – lithe and graceful." Olcott jokingly concludes that "William was evidently cut out for a great medium, but not for a great dancer.[xlix] The dancers imitating Honto demonstrate that what was sought from ancient races was a way to escape one's own body, if only for a weekend. Honto's dance is lithe and graceful, her authenticity is not threatened, but enhanced, by the fact that she is in unison with other Oriental cultures in her movement. Simultaneously an Oriental "almeh" meaning young woman, as well as a "Zingala" meaning gypsy in Italian, Honto becomes a fixture of piecemeal folk culture fabrications for the Spiritualist's enjoyment.

With its emphasis on costume, transformation and elaborate claims, the spectacle described by Olcott is somewhere between a circus performance and a minstrel show. Though Eric Lott doesn't discuss séances in *Love and Theft* he does mention the correlation to the minstrel show and the circus in fabricating folk cultures and describes the minstrel stage as one on which "appropriated goods and manufactured daydreams

[were] transformed into culture."[l] One of the reasons the Spiritualist engagements with these appropriations and daydreams was read as problematic in their own day was because they didn't present them as entertainment (which they clearly were) but insisted that they were scientific. It is this failure to distinguish between science and entertainment which proved most fascinating in spirit photographer Mumler's trial for fraud. In 1869, five years before the Eddy séances, the circus ringleader, P.T. Barnum himself, would testify against Mumler. In his amusing testimony, Barnum claims that his own appropriations were acceptable because when, for example, he used a "mermaid" from his sideshow he never purported that the mythic woman was scientifically "real."[li]

In a case which delved into the anxieties felt by many in the day, Mumler's lawyer drummed up a unique defense insisting that one could just as easily accuse Morse of fraud if his telegraph wires were "crossed," implying that both technologies were equally miraculous and connected to the divine.[lii] This of course, was not the defense which saved Mumler. Perhaps indicative of the general interest in the scandalous ephemeral nature of these celebrities, the trial was highly publicized and dismissed for lack of sufficient evidence. As demonstrated by the jury that could not condemn him, Mumler's photos may have obviously been fraudulent, but they found a sympathetic, if not bemused public because like the Eddys seances, Mumler's work was at least in dialogue with the concerns of the day.

Already sensitive to the Spiritualist reputation for chicanery, Olcott is careful to distance himself from Spirit photography because by the time *People from the Other World* was published, Mumler's trial had made the practice infamous. Olcott reports, "I

have never seen any of the so-called spirit photographs that appeared to me as genuine."[liii] Showing his attentiveness to scientific accuracy, Olcott points to a portrait of Spiritualist Katie King made by another famous spirit photographer, Holmes. "Let the inquirer examine the shadow under the alleged spirit's chin . . . was evidently added with a brush and ink after the negative was taken."[liv] While Olcott dismisses the spirit photo's authenticity completely, he chooses to believe in a number of spectacles which show an identical interest in haunted technology.

Though highly critical of the mechanical camera, far less complicated (and far more obviously fraudulent) spiritualist "tools" are accepted without skepticism by Olcott because they don't threaten his primary and paradoxical quest for the "very old" root of modern inventions. For instance, in a way almost identical to the photographic process, Olcott "develops" spirit writing or, messages written from the dead. He relates the procedure as such: "I laid a piece of thick paper on top of a cupboard attached to the wall of his (Horatio [Eddy's]) bedroom. . . The next morning I found the paper covered with signatures, headed with some lines of wretched Latin, and topped off with some equally bad English."[lv] Like a negative left in the darkened chamber of a camera or photo paper run through a bath of developer in a dark room, what Olcott has constructed is essentially his own spirit camera.

In his collected lectures, Olcott notes that no type of spirit communication is more impressive than the audible voice. "I have heard these voices of every volume, from the faintest whisper close to the ear . . . to the stentorian roar that would well –nigh shake the room. . . I have heard them speak to me through paper tubes, through metal trumpets,

through empty space."[lvi] In the 1870s, the telephone was under patent and perhaps the roars and whispers Olcott hears through the tubes and trumpets is indicative of a spiritualist telephone. He then relates miracles he has seen from ones learnt in "the secret sciences in India and Egypt" from these students of the occult Olcott experiences "letters from people in far countries" dropped "from space" into his lap. Though Olcott claims this instantaneous memo "dropped" in his lap is done so through arcane sciences, it seems much more likely that the contemporary inspiration for an instantaneous letter would be the telegraph. Among these examples of occult science are a number of other telephonic and telegraphic mysteries: "writing made to appear upon paper and slates laid upon the floor" and "drawings upon the ceiling beyond anyone's reach."[lvii] All of this led Olcott to conclude, "Our homes are seemingly invaded by an invisible host of good and evil spirits."[lviii]

Frustrated by an institution which would not entertain such notions, Olcott invidiously claimed "they [modern scientists] leave us to grope our own way toward the Truth, and if we fall into error, we have the right to hold them accountable for they are the custodians of knowledge, our teachers, and guides. If they do not help us, we must search for ourselves."[lix] In seeking a "teacher" or "guide" from the scientific institution, Olcott reveals that he was fundamentally at odds with modern science because he was seeking out the social structure of a religious institution rather than a scientific one. Whether Olcott himself believed that science had abandoned him or was simply looking for a dramatic language to explain his turn to the occult, his questions could be entertained because a huge portion of the public was curious and excited by the very

possibilities science could offer. In an era of such advancements, the repercussions of new inventions like the telegraph and camera were so far reaching that they did indeed seem haunted and to an extent more intelligent and alive than their creators.

In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria argues that costumed Indian play like the kind seen at the Eddy séances often occurs during "misrule rituals" when cycles of regeneration are seemingly in flux.[lx] Because Olcott and the Eddys found themselves generally threatened by and fascinated with modernity, their costumed play involved a variety of cultures which they imagined to be remote in space and time in order to embrace a moment which Deloria refers to as "liminal." Deloria describes liminality as a kind of "twilight" moment, when such changes occur that one seems "frozen" in time. According to Deloria, such periods are "Evocative, creative, and often frightening. . . [and] crucial to [facilitate] an individual's (or a society's) final reemergence as something new."[lxi] Deloria's description of liminality is so apt in its application to the Eddy séances because Olcott and the Eddys, believed that they were literally approaching a moment in which time would come to a standstill and the dead would be reunited with the living.

In calling Indians to their stages, the Eddys fulfilled Olcott's own mythic prophecy: that new inventions were in fact the province of peoples figured as remote in space and time. At one of the Eddy séances, after placing a new machine on stage for Honto to examine, Olcott writes that "When Honto came out she saluted us as usual, and then turned and scrutinized the machine with Indian-like hesitancy."[lxii] The hesitancy or cautious willingness to engage becomes a cathartic spectacle for the audience. In *No Place of Grace* Jackson Lears writes that what Nietzsche called a "weightless period"

was characterized by "A weightless culture of material comfort and spiritual blandness [which] was breeding weightless persons who longed for intense experiences to give some definition, some distinct outline and substance to their vaporous lives."[lxiii] Spiritualist behavior in this text indicates that it was in fact in manipulating the weight and the contours of their realities through measuring and defying physical limitations which gave them the greatest sense of satisfaction. After the Eddys place a scale on the séance stage, the audience cathartically participates in the great joy which Honto takes in this new device. Playfully manipulating the machine rather than being manipulated by it, Honto floats on to it with one foot, and demonstrates her ability to become 88, and then 58 pounds.[lxiv] The impracticality of her weight and her ability to shift her physical form at will seems to be the main redeeming quality of the modern for Spiritualists. It is in the very ability to vaporize, to disappear, to blend, blur and explore that Lears mentions as a moment of crisis and that Deloria mentions as revolutionary which Spiritualists enjoy, so long as it is an Indian body which controls the scale by force of the empowering authenticity of magic.

Like in any museum or circus, the construction of culture at the Eddy séances was carefully monitored by its curators. In a footnote, Olcott complains of a railing that runs around the stage, "This railing is a nuisance, at any rate, and should be removed, its only conceivable use, that I can see, is to deter rude spectators from rushing forward to grasp the phantoms."[lxv] In the process of appropriating other cultures, it became imminently important for the Eddys to deflect suspicion and protect the illusion that their séances were truly blessed by beneficently playful ghosts of peoples remote in space and time.

Indeed, Olcott's narrative is suffused with such assurances that all materializations and miraculous occurrences have been carefully examined for fraud, and found to be authentic magic. To reveal that there were no spirits, but only actors in costume would undo the illusion that their performance was anything other than a guiltily desirous appropriation.

A Letter from King Philip: Indian Rights and Spiritualism

Just precisely what living Indians made of this kind of ghostly cultural appropriation has been a topic of discussion among critics like Kucich, McGarry, Cox and Deloria. Some Spiritualists, according to McGarry, did listen to the Indian cause, "Spiritualists embraced the Native American cause in an economy of exchange and debt rather than through sublimation of guilt."[lxvi] According to McGarry, beginning in the 1860s, the messages delivered by Indian ghosts at séances changed in conjunction with growing questions surrounding Indian reform efforts. Where Powhatan had once visited a young girl in the 1850s saying "We are happy now. Heaven is our home," "Militant Indian" spirits, as McGarry calls them, now came demanding rights.[lxvii] The conversation turned farther and farther from the ineffective optimism of universal love, towards a call for activism and accountability for broken promises.

Deloria notes a similar adoption among whites of the militant Indian persona. Within Lewis Henry Morgan's Indian fraternity, members would dress as Indians and castigate outsiders as "pale faces."[lxviii] In Deloria's example, such an invocation is more obviously self-serving and disconnected from activism. This kind of call to activism was often gendered, with ghostly figures of male warriors espousing the Spiritualist cause. In

People from the Other World, Olcott strangely utilizes this popular trope of the militant ancestor to refer to whites mourning the enervation of Western European culture when he quotes John W. Draper's "The Great Conflict." The author laments that "Military fervor on behalf of faith has disappeared. Its only souvenirs are the marble effigies of crusading knights reposing in their tombs in the silent crypts in churches."[lxix] It seems then that the desire to find a "militant" ghostly Indian had little or nothing to do with activism and more to do with anxiety that with scientific advances, the world was slipping towards an age of moral enervation, as formulated by Lears. What appeared to be activism was in fact, again a kind of self-serving "salvage ethnography," an enterprise "haunted" from its beginnings by fractures in logic.[lxx] In other words, the antimodern impulse that led white Spiritualists to summon militant Indian warriors and crusading knights was one and the same.

Conclusion

Brinton claims that Spiritualism was prevented from becoming a full science because its adherents were blinded by their own desires to see proof of an afterlife. According to him "sorcery is science seen upside down."[lxxi] In such societies for "psychic research" theosophical examination begins with the "*possible"* existence of ghosts but "this possible ground is seized by the charlatan as proved basis for his illusory edifice." Brinton concludes with the sweeping gesture that superstition is uniform everywhere across time because all superstitions are always "based on those desires and that ignorance which are and ever will be a part of man's nature."[lxxii] According to Brinton, the most valuable function of folklore is to reveal the universal, not the particular. It

seems odd that Brinton would cite an over eagerness to believe as the chink in Spiritualist's armor, when his own folkloric accounts seem to function similarly.

If the Spiritualists offered "science upside down" perhaps it is because, like Olcott, they had read and been influenced by sentiments of the day expressed in magazines like *Century* where Brinton's article first appeared. In Brinton's article's appeal to the reader's inner savage he strays from pure diffusionism into a more "pseudo scientific" realm informed primarily by antimodern sentiments. Hardly a hard-science article, his tone is playful, and he himself mentions having seen ghosts and to be catering to his readers' "savage" impulses. It seems odd then that he would call spiritualism a "pseudo-science" when he seems in agreement with many of their views. By evoking ghosts, the beliefs of people remote in space and time, and Spiritualists in the same article, Brinton is appealing to the antimodern sentiments of his audience as much as the Eddys were on their estate. At one point, Brinton even shares an account of a sorcerer outcast by society, "lugging on his back the machinery of his harmless but suspicious deceptions."[lxxiii] which is almost identical to Olcott's depiction of the rural, outcast and misunderstood Eddy brothers with their occult apparatus, entertaining guests at their rural cabin. One wonders how Brinton could lump Spiritualists in with ancient sorcerers and ghosts of every culture in the same article, or read all ghosts as similar, without being just as guilty as Spiritualists of fabricating evidence to support a tenuous hypothesis. Perhaps Brinton was made so anxious by Spiritualists because his own ethnographic report was also "science turned upside down," decontextualizing cultures in favor of finding universalizing principles out of an antimodern sentiment. In Brinton's entertaining

ethnographic piece on superstitions, one sees the ways in which diffusionist ethnography shares a kinship with Olcott and Blavatsky's theosophy. Blavatsky and Olcott would not have been inspired to visit Mt. Arrarat or Africa in their search for Occult sciences without first being inspired by the accounts of diffusionist ethnographers like Brinton. In turn, Brinton's articles would not have been as popular as they were without answering a broader antimodern ambivalence already present in the public sphere. In this bizarre triangulation between the public, the Eddy group and diffusionist ethnography, one sees a web of mutually reinforcing ideologies born of the encroachment of a seemingly haunted age.

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[i] Henry Steel Olcott. *People from the Other World.* (Cambridge University Press facsimile of original. Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1875. Reprint, 2011). P. 441

[ii] Barbara Weisberg. *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism.* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004). P.20

[iii] Weisberg 264.

[iv] Drew Gilpin Faust. *This Republic of Suffering.* (New York: Random House, 2008). P. 185.

[v] Evans 22.

[vi] Evans 32

[vii] Brad Evans. *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). p. 8

[viii] Philip Deloria. *Playing Indian.* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

[ix] Jackson Lears. *No Place of Grace.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) p. xiii.

[x] Henry Steel Olcott. *Sorgho and Imphee.* (New York: A.O. Moore, Agricultural Book Publisher, 1858) P.194

[xi] Olcott 408.

[xii] Olcott 71.

[xiii] Ibid. 251.

[xiv] Daniel Brinton. "Popular Superstitions of Europe." *Century: A Popular Quarterly.* Volume 56, Issue 5 September 1898. Accessed Cornell MOA Archive http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-

idx?c=cent;cc=cent;rgn=full%20text;idno=cent0056-5;didno=cent0056-5;view=image;seq=659;node=cent0056-5%3A1;page=root;size=100 p.645
[xv] Olcott iv.
[xvi] Ibid. 489
[xvii] Brinton 644-5.
[xviii] Olcott *Lectures* 248.
[xix] Ibid. 161, 248.
[xx] Ibid92.
[xxi] Olcott 84.
[xxii] Evans 5.
[xxiii] Olcott 140
[xxiv] Ibid. 141
[xxv] Ibid 62.
[xxvi] Evans 43.
[xxvii] Ibid 43.
[xxviii] Evans 44.
[xxix] Olcott 67.
[xxx] Kucich 77.
[xxxi] Ibid 77.
[xxxii] Olcott 320
[xxxiii] Brinton 645
[xxxiv] Olcott 333
[xxxv] Olcott 335
[xxxvi] Ibid 334.
[xxxvii] Ibid 337.
[xxxviii] Ibid.
[xxxix] Olcott 338.
[xl] Evans 70.
[xli] Olcott vii
[xlii] *Human Nature.* London, The Progressive Library, 15 Southampton Row, Bloomsbury Square, Holborn, W.C. 1874. Print. P.515
[xliii] Ibid. 515
[xliv] Ibid 365.
[xlv] Ibid 217.
[xlvi] Evans 6.
[xlvii] John Kucich. Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature. (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2004). P.91.
[xlviii] Molly McGarry. *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. (Berkeley: UC Press, 2008). P. 4.
[xlix] Olcott 141.
[l] Eric Lott. *Love and Theft.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). 101.
[li] Louis Kaplan. *The Strange Case of William Mumler.* (Minneapolis: UM Press, 2008).

[lii] Ibid 24.
[liii] Olcott 148.
[liv] Ibid 148.
[lv] Ibid 234.
[lvi] Olcott. *Lectures.* 231-2.
[lvii] Ibid 251.
[lviii] Olcott xi.
[lix] Olcott xi.
[lx] Deloria 24.
[lxi] Ibid 35.
[lxii] Ibid 242.
[lxiii] Lears 32.
[lxiv] Olcott 242.
[lxv] Ibid. 139.
[lxvi] McGarry 84.
[lxvii] Ibid 84.
[lxviii] Deloria 90.
[lxix] Olcott 407.
[lxx] Deloria 106.
[lxxi] Brinton 655.
[lxxii] Brinton 645.
[lxxiii] Ibid 653.

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